

HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS AND NOT BE PERCEIVED AS A DUMB ASS

Asking advice is a profoundly misunderstood process

Judged by the number of times business people are urged not to reinvent the wheel and to proactively seek help from others, asking for advice would seem to be a given. There are, after all, shelves full of books recommending that professionals pursue feedback and access teammates' knowledge. But it rarely happens. Why is that?

The short answer is that most of us don't ask questions for fear of being perceived as a dumb ass. The research shows that especially when the task is novel, and when it's central to the organization's core competence, the social costs of asking for help are too high. We don't want to be perceived as incompetent, dependent or inferior to others.

We all need advice to improve the quality of our skill base, enhance our decisions, make certain that our choices are on target and sometimes to spread the inherent risk of decisions around the organization. Failing to do so can result in serious failure or limitations being placed upon a person's career. Yet many still refrain from seeking help regardless of the accessibility and advantages in doing so.

Transform your relations

Advice seeking has very significant benefits. It increases the possibility of finding better solutions to genuine problems, while creating a richer and more productive relationship. The importance of this issue should not be overlooked. On occasion, I have observed others ask for advice as much for gaining support as for getting answers to questions.

When you ask someone for help, you're establishing collaboration as the norm and growth as a major subtext. By seeking advice, you're letting others know that you're willing to confront your own ideas and face up to biases or inadequate assumptions. This authenticity lowers defensiveness and work barriers. It helps flush out the causes of less-than-desired effectiveness. Such partnering also provides opportunity for the resolution of complex problems and creation of innovations. The bottom line is that bright people think very differently about issues so it's nearly always to your benefit to access that intelligence.

How to ask for advice and feedback

When you use the following model for asking questions and advice, managers will see you as more likable and competent than those who do not ask advice. They'll also be more likely to talk up your expertise to colleagues which could lead to future opportunities. Significantly, this protocol makes possible more valid information as well as enhanced commitment from others. The format includes five steps:

--set the context

Set up the context concretely and intentionally. Context is decisive at every level of the conversation. It's a reminder that relationships of authenticity and accountability are important. Normally context setting can be done with two or three sentences.

--state your expertise

Fears that you will be perceived as a dumb ass by asking for advice are largely unfounded. Studies show that managers who receive a poor review and ask for advice to improve their behavior are considered to be more likable and more competent than those who do not. Executives are also more likely to talk up such a manager's expertise to colleagues. Successful professionals understand the value of self-promotion. Humble, straight-forward requests for advice without sucking up are so unusual in organizations that they become a very constructive form of impression management.

--emphasize your advisor's unique qualifications

You've sought advice from this person for a reason, so don't forget to highlight why you've selected your particular advisor. It demonstrates that you're a discerning advice seeker. I still remember a former student who is now a 3M executive saying: "Dan, with your deep background in national consulting, you have a clear understanding of what's going on globally in the field of I'd like to know. . . ." I was putty in his hands in spite of knowing exactly what he was doing.

--make your request concrete and specific

Focus your request narrowly and concretely. That way you won't be perceived as a needy "project" or unprepared. When first learning this model, jot down the issues on a small card, and work from it when meeting with a mentor. In fact, when learning a skill, write the request out in eight to twelve words. That is not as easy as it sounds, but simple talking points help to focus the mind.

--loop back after trying on the advice

After you've acted on the advice, whether it worked or not, report back to your coach. Tell her briefly, what you did and whether or not it worked. If it worked, you may want to explain why. If it didn't, you should explain why it didn't—to the degree possible—from your perspective. That may result in another coaching experience. It will build respect for you and make it possible to return to that mentor for future advice.

USE PROTOCOLS AND SCRIPTS

Protocols (rules) and scripts are proven step-by-step strategies for gaining a particular response--techniques that can be used to resolve recurring issues.

Brain scientists have recently researched the actual impact of such techniques on brain development. They've found that every technique or skill we develop exists as a circuit in the brain. In the language of scientists, "experience-expectant processes" are teed up and waiting to create skill circuits. A "skill has to be formed and optimized," but circuits are available and waiting to lock onto those skills that are in the development stage. Technique development, the practicing and repeating of a skill initiates an expertise circuit. The effect is further development of brainpower.

Studies show that it takes at least a month of technique development to gain flexibility and expertise. By that time, you'll have the technique ingrained through feedback, know how to respond to blowback (what I call "unintended consequences") and to the push-back syndrome (the resistance one often gets from colleagues when cultivating new behaviors).

In developing this technique of advice seeking it's important to remember the following: The person you're talking with may not know you very well—especially how you think or how you make decisions. She will probably not know how much experience and success you've had (your readiness). Furthermore, she may not know much about the project, and where you are in the process. Finally, she may not know the level of detail you need in response to your question. To illustrate, I provide actual statements and what you have to say and do.

Take this case as an example. You have been promoted to product manager at a household products firm. This is your first experience managing a project. You need to test the effectiveness of an advertisement for a household product. You've done communication testing, but are not familiar with persuasion testing. Your previous boss has taken a position at another firm and you haven't established your relationship with the research directors yet. You'd like a recommendation for partnering with a senior person, but don't want to show off your ignorance about persuasion testing.

WHAT TO DO

Set the stage: Briefly summarize the project and your relation to it.

State expertise: Summarize your marketing research background.

Qualifications of respondent: Identify and engage a manager with personnel knowledge.

Advice requested: Explain your need for senior expertise in persuasion testing. Ask for senior support person recommendation.

Loop back: Report on the execution of recommendation. Express gratitude.

WHAT TO SAY

"Jim, as you may know I'm working on the project. This is my first major responsibility as a project manager. Currently, I'm focusing on the product advertising research."

"Jim, over the past three years I've had experience with a number of projects, and gained expertise in nearly all project segments including. . . . However, I have no experience in persuasion testing."

"I've come to you because Mary tells me that you know the senior research personnel and their expertise exceptionally well."

"Since, I have no direct experience in persuasion testing. . . . I'd like your recommendation for the best senior person to support us in that testing."

"Jim, I just wanted to stop by to thank you for recommending. . . . He was exceptionally helpful, straightforward and a very willing coach. He pointed out a number of places where we could have made mistakes, but didn't. The VP told us we did an outstanding job. Thanks again."

Fears about asking for advice are understandable, but unfounded. By following this model, professionals can learn a new skill, add to their work intelligence and increase both the trust and capacity to learn from others.

Learning is a contact sport. Although the Lone Ranger never existed, he remains a fundamental myth for we Americans. This archetype represents the naïve idea that you can succeed without help, yet studies show that nearly 70% of all learning is network based. The ability to seek and request advice is essential for career success in the highly competitive 21st century.